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The atomic bombings: facts, myths and more

By Alan Carr, Senior Historian, [National Security Research Center](#)

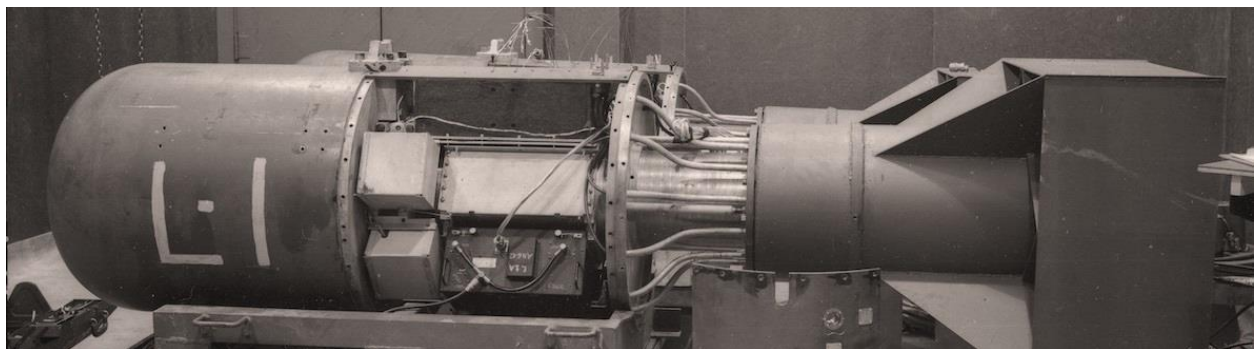
Seventy-five years later, the Trinity test of July 16, 1945 is still rightly remembered as a monumental scientific achievement. The test has a multifaceted legacy representing incredible discovery, unparalleled hope and unprecedented peril.

The weapons designed and tested at wartime Los Alamos were not intended to deter, but to destroy: On August 6, 1945, the world's first weaponized nuclear device was used for that very purpose. Little Boy, a gun-assembled enriched uranium weapon, detonated over Hiroshima that morning destroying several square miles of the city and killing tens of thousands. Three days later, Fat Man, an imploding plutonium weapon, destroyed Nagasaki. On August 14, an armistice was declared and a few weeks later World War II came to an official end.

We've all heard these historical facts before, but was it really *that* simple? Nuclear strike + nuclear strike = unconditional surrender? Bringing World War II to an end was an arduous, complex, and very tenuous undertaking with important historical nuances to consider.

Alex Wellerstein, professor of History at the Stevens Institute of Technology, recently wrote an outstanding article that addresses the complexities involved in interpreting the use of the atomic bombs and the end of World War II and brings interesting perspective to a few commonly misinterpreted and misreported areas of bombing history. Below, you will find some myth-busting excerpts from Wellerstein's article prepared exclusively for LANLTODAY. **Intrigued? See the box at right to get a copy of my full-length interview with Wellerstein.**

Be sure to visit Wellerstein's website, [nuclearsecrecyblog.com](#), and look for his forthcoming book, "Restricted Data: The History of Nuclear Secrecy in the United States."



Atomic bombs: Historical myths busted (you decide!)

> **Myth:** There was a "decision" to use the atomic bombs.

According to Wellerstein:

The biggest and most important thing that one ought to know is that there was no “decision to use the atomic bomb” in the sense that the phrase implies. President **Harry Truman** did not weigh the advantages and disadvantages of using the atomic bomb, nor did he see it as a choice between invasion or bombing.

This particular “decision” narrative, in which Truman unilaterally decides that the bombing was the lesser of two evils, is a postwar fabrication, developed by the people who used the atomic bomb (notably Gen. **Leslie Groves** and Secretary of War **Henry Stimson**, but encouraged by Truman himself later) as a way of rationalizing and justifying the bombings in the face of growing unease and criticism about them.

In an article published by Stimson in *Harper's* in early 1947, is where the “decision to use the bomb” narrative was first put into its most persuasive and expansive form. I find it is useful to point out that even the “orthodox” narratives have their origins as well — people frequently treat them as if they fell out of the sky or were handed down on tablets.

What did happen was far more complicated, multifaceted, and at times chaotic — like most real history. The idea that the bomb would be used was assumed by nearly everyone who was involved in its production at a high level, which did not include Truman (who was excluded until after President **Franklin Roosevelt's** death). There were a few voices against its use, but there were far more people who assumed that it was built to be used. There were many reasons why people wanted it to be used, including ending the war as soon as possible, and very few reasons not to use it. Saving Japanese lives was just not a goal — it was never an elaborate moral calculus of that sort. Rather than one big “decision,” the atomic bombings were the product of a multitude of many smaller decisions and assumptions that stretched back into late 1942, when the Manhattan Project really got started.

This is not to say there were not decisions made along the line. There were lots of decisions made, about the type of bomb being built, the kind of fuzing used for it (which determines what kinds of targets it would be ideal against), the types of targets... Truman wasn't part of these. His role was extremely peripheral to the entire endeavor. As General Groves put it, Truman's role was “one of noninterference — basically, a decision not to upset the existing plans.”

Truman was involved in only two major issues relating to the atomic bomb decision-making during World War II. These were concurring with Stimson's recommendations about the non-bombing of Kyoto (and the bombing of Hiroshima instead). The other is the (not-unrelated, I argue) decision on August 10, 1945, to halt further atomic bombings (at least temporarily).

> **Myth: The only options were to bomb or invade.**

According to Wellerstein:

The plan was to bomb *and* to invade, *and* to have the Soviets invade, *and* to blockade, and so on. It was an “everything-and-the-kitchen-sink” approach to ending the war with Japan, though there were a few things missing from the “everything,” like modifying the unconditional surrender requirements that the Americans knew (through intercepted communications) were causing the Japanese considerable difficulty in accepting surrender.

> **Myth: In 1945, atomic bombs were the only way to end WWII.**

According to Wellerstein:

There are two main explanations given as to why the Americans dropped the atomic bombs:

- One is the “decision to use the bomb” narrative (end the war to avoid an invasion).
- The other is that they did it to scare the Soviet Union (to show they had a new weapon). This latter position is sometimes called the Alperovitz thesis, because historian-economist **Gar Alperovitz** did a lot of work to popularize and defend it in the 1980s and 1990s.

When I talk to students about the atomic bombings, I usually have them tell me what they know of them. Maybe 80% know the “decision to use the bomb” narrative. I chart this out on the whiteboard, highlighting the key facts of it. A few in each class know the Alperovitz narrative, which they got from various alternative sources. We then discuss the implications of each — what does believing in either make you feel about World War II, the atomic bombings, about the United States as a world power today?

And then I tell them that historians today tend to reject *both* of these narratives. This makes them want to throw their hands up in frustration, I am sure, but that’s what scholarship is about.

Historians have found that both of these narratives are far too clean and neat: they both assume that the nation had a single driving purpose in using the atomic bombs. This isn’t the case. (And, spoiler alert, it’s almost never the case.) As already noted, the process had many different parts to it, and no single “decision” at all, and so one can find historical figures who had many different perspectives. What is interesting is that for those involved in the making of the bomb, and the highest-level decisions about its use, almost all of those perspectives converged on the idea of using it.

A quick end to war

So there certainly were people who hoped it would end the war quickly to avoid invasion. There were also those who hoped it would end the war before the Soviets declared war on the Japanese, giving the U.S. a freer hand in Asia in the postwar period. (More on that in a moment.) There were also those who considered it “just another weapon” and attached no special significance to its use. And there were those who took the entirely opposite approach, seeing it as a herald of a

future nuclear arms race, and who believed that the best first use of the bomb ought to be the one that laid bare its horrible spectacle.

Scaring the Soviets

And there *were* those who thought that one of the “bonuses” of using the bomb was to scare the Soviets. It’s not just a “revisionist” (a term I hate) idea — one can document it pretty easily (and Alperovitz does). This strain of thinking was particularly prominent in the thinking of Secretary of State James Byrnes, whose advocacy of “atomic diplomacy” against the Soviets was explicit. It’s not a goofy idea. The question is whether it is the whole story — and it’s not.

Many motivations, really

Where *both* the Stimson and Alperovitz narratives fail is that they insist that there were only singular reasons to use the atomic bomb. But there were many people involved with it, and thus many different motivations. That’s not a problem if you want to argue for or against the atomic bombings — but implying it is just one or the other is a misrepresentation of this history, and also of how people generally operate. People are complicated.

> Myth: Atomic bombs were the only reason WWII ended.

According to Wellerstein:

My least favorite way in which the end of World War II is discussed goes along these lines: “The atomic bombs ended World War II.” My second-least favorite way is a weaker variant that is becoming more common: “A few days after the atomic bombs were dropped, the Japanese surrendered.” Note the latter doesn’t really say the bombs did it... but implies it very strongly.

Scholars have known for a long time that the end of World War II was an immensely complicated event. Several events happened within the space of a few days, including:

- The bombing of the city of Hiroshima
- The Soviet declaration of war against the Japanese, and subsequent invasion of Manchuria
- The bombing of the city of Nagasaki
- Internal friction within the Japanese high command
- An attempted coup by junior military officers
- An offer of surrender that still maintained the status of the emperor
- A rejection of this offer by the Americans
- An increase of American conventional bombing
- An acceptance of unconditional surrendered by the Emperor himself

If I tried to write out all of the events that the above encapsulates, this post would get very long indeed. The point I want to make, though, is that it isn’t some simple matter of “atomic bombs =

unconditional surrender.” Even with two atomic bombs *and* the Soviet invasion, the Japanese high command *still* didn’t offer unconditional surrender. It was a very close thing all around, and it strikes me as impossible to totally disentangle all of the causes of their surrender.

I think it is fair to say that the atomic bombs played a *role* in the Japanese surrender. It is clear they were one of the issues on their mind, both those in the military who wanted the country to resist invasion as bloodily as possible (with the hope of making the Allies accept more favorable terms for Japan), and those who wanted a diplomatic end of the war (though even those did not imagine accepting unconditional surrender — they wanted to preserve the imperial house).

Russian image of the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, Aug. 9–Sept. 2, 1945. There’s something about all that red that, I think, underscores how disastrous the Japanese would have seen this.

It is also clear that the Soviet declaration of war and subsequent invasion of Manchuria loomed largely in all of their minds as well. Which is more important? Could we imagine the same results occurring if one hadn’t occurred?

There are some who believe the war could have been ended without the atomic bombings. I’ve never been totally convinced of their arguments; they strike me as a bit overly optimistic. But I think it is also clear that the Soviet role deserves far more attention than it typically gets in American versions of this story; it is easy to document its impact. And then again, one can ask how much would have been changed if the unconditional surrender requirement had been modified earlier on, like some American advisors had urged.

> Myth: Atomic bombs were less controversial in 1945.

According to Wellerstein:

While the majority of Americans supported the atomic bombings at the time — they were, after all, told they had ended World War II, saved huge numbers of lives, and so on — it is worth just noting that approval was not universal, and that people questioning whether they had to be used, or whether they had ended World War II, were not fringe.

Some of the most critical voices about the atomic bombings came from military figures who, for a variety of reasons, would come out against the bombings in the years afterwards. The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, a military-led assessment of bombing effectiveness in World War II, concluded in July 1946 that:

"Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey’s opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no [American] invasion had been planned or contemplated."

Which is a pretty shocking statement to read! I'm not saying you have to agree with it; you're not bound by isolated judgments of the past, and there are good reasons to doubt the reasoning of the USSBS (they were acting in part out of fear that the atomic bombs would overshadow conventional bombing efforts and undercut their desire for a large and independent Air Force). But I think it is useful to point out that doubtful voices are not a recent thing, nor are they exclusively associated with the "obvious" points of views (like those sympathetic to Communism or the Soviets).

The past is complicated, and the people in the past were complicated as well. I have frequently observed that the people who tell us not to impose present-day judgments on the past are unaware that many of these same judgments were made in the past as well.

Want more?



[Read](#) the full story in the summer issue of National Security Science magazine. You can also [watch](#) Paul Tibbets IV speak in Los Alamos in April 2013, when he visited as part of the Lab's Bradbury Science Museum LANL 70th Anniversary Lecture Series.

Additional resources related to the atomic bombs, including documents, films, photos, and more, are part of the collections in the [National Security Resource Center](#) — the Lab's classified library. Contact us at nsrc@lanl.gov.

Trinity 75th: New website, virtual events

To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Trinity test, the Laboratory has planned a number of internal events — including panel discussions and showings of historical videos — that can be attended virtually.

Watch for the announcement of these events in LANLTODAY and on the new Trinity 75th website.

Also be sure to read the summer “history” issue of National Security Science magazine, which highlights the Trinity test and the Hiroshima mission.